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THE OUTLOOK INTERVIEW: MANSOUR FARHANG, TOP KHOMEINI ALLY WHO FLED IRAN, TALKS TO DON OBERDORFER

Watching Your Revolution Go Down the Drain

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Q: So it was just a game, a sideshow?

A: It was just a complete farce. Which really means that continuously from the very beginning of the revolutionary year until the day Carter left, they never understood Iran.

Q: You'd been reading documents of the United States embassy [captured by the militants and recently published] in Tehran. They say what people in the embassy really thought was going on in Iran. What is your assessment of the knowledge by the embassy experts of what was taking place in your country?

A: The documents show that American officials in Iran had an impressive knowledge of the internal functioning and arrangements of the Iranian political order — including a great deal of knowledge about the personal qualities and characteristics of the key individuals in positions of authority from the shah to his sister, the prime minister and various ministers. The failure of intelligence was very conceptual. American analysts in Iran, just as American academicians in this country, did not see a threat to the regime coming from the populace. The only source of threat they perceived was the military.

Q: If they had such good information about the individuals and about the situation, how could they conceivably reach the conclusion as late as 1978 that Iran was not in a revolutionary or even pre-revolutionary condition?

A: They knew nothing about the opposition. They knew nothing about the cultural, social consequences of the shah's programs. They had contempt for the culture.

Q: Contempt for the culture?

A: Contempt for the culture. That this culture is incapable of people rising up. What American officials told the shah and his sister and the rest of the entourage — complimenting them and praising them for their Westernization and so forth — was very different from the way they really felt. They knew about the corruption, cynicism, submissiveness, absence of loyalty, total absence of sincerity with respect to the government.

There were some individuals within the embassy who really understood the Iranian culture and in fact were sympathetic. But these individuals had no input into the reporting or the analysis of what was happening in Iran. The real reporting came from the CIA operatives.

One CIA man by the name of Guy Rutherford was introduced to Abol Hassan Bani-Sadr in December 1978 in Paris. He was introduced to Bani-Sadr as a progressive American businessman representing a firm in Philadelphia. The man went to Bani-Sadr criticizing American policies toward Iran, supporting the revolution, and saying that in his view there was no contradiction between a revolutionary success and continuation of equitable trade relations between Iran and the United States.

Q: This man was actually a CIA agent?

A: Was actually a CIA agent. He says to Bani-Sadr, "Will you be interested in becoming our economic adviser when you return to Iran?" Bani-Sadr says "No, I am not interested because I am going to publish a newspaper. I am going to be involved in politics. But if you want any information or guidance we will have a minister of commerce and they can give you all the information," and whatever. [Bani-Sadr] talked as if he is talking to an independent progressive businessman.

A month later he returns to Iran, he calls on Bani-Sadr once again who was having lunch at his sister's house and Bani-Sadr asked him to come over. They have another very generalized conversation about the revolution. I think it's fascinating to read Rutherford's memo about Bani-Sadr.

Q: What does he say?

A: He says "Bani-Sadr is an ambitious man. He is a potential agent. He does not need money right now, but later on he might need us. He wears a gold watch, and that indicates the man is materialistic. He wears a well-tailored suit, it means he has a taste for a luxurious life. He wants to become a newspaper publisher." And then he generalizes that newspaper publishers are ambitious and open to bribery or corruption.

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